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ABSTRACT

This is a report from a task force formed by Howard Community College (Maryland) to examine existing and future markets. The task force also explored ways to use marketing strategies to attract potential customers to the college. The task force recommends that the college use its strengths to attract customers, such as its commitment to open access, low tuition, institutional focus on teaching and learning, attention placed on students' success, and connection to the community and different job markets. New markets identified by the committee included designing programs for social and senior groups, offering management training to churches and other non-profit organizations, and creating programs for children and youth to increase public awareness of the community college. The committee recommends that the college perform a cost/benefit analysis of every action before implementation. Other recommendations include: (1) increasing the number of transfer students in order to create a specific marketable college goal and focus; (2) individually branding specific college departments and events; (3) utilizing the Internet for internal and external communication of college information; and (4) using students to recruit prospective students. Finally, the task force recommends hiring a full-time marketing administrator and being more aggressive in marketing the community college. (MKF)

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COMMUNICATING WITH CURRENT AND NEW MARKETS

Task Force Members

Chairpersons

Phyllis B. Madachy – Office of Aging
Maurice M. Simpkins – Ryland Group, Inc.

Members

David A. Rakes – The Rakes Company and HCC Board of Trustees
James G. Breiner – Baltimore Business Journal
Malynda H. Madzel – Custom Telemarketing Services, Inc.
Carol M. Marty – The Rouse Company
Carolyn West Price – Impact Marketing & Public Relations

Howard Community College

Ronald X. Roberson
Randall R. Bengfort
Bernice K. Brunton
Lucy K. Gardner

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J. Frank

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Communicating with New and Existing Markets
A Task Force of Howard Community College's
1998-1999 Commission on the Future

The Taskforce

Mission

The New Markets Task Force was charged with examining current and future markets for Howard Community College and exploring how the college can use marketing to keep current customers while attracting potential customers. We have based the recommendations in this report on a strategic marketing perspective that will enhance the college's position in the marketplace while adhering to HCC's mission.

We worked from two basic assumptions:

1. HCC is committed to growth, wants to actively identify the best markets, and chooses to purposefully craft products and services for those markets.

2. HCC will take steps to support growth and sustain or increase quality, including physical plant consideration and investment in any aspect of the college affected by growth.

This report comes with a warning label - HCC must perform critical cost/benefit analyses before implementing any of the Task Force recommendations. The committee developed a basic insight about HCC as it talked with staff. As an educational institution, the college operates under certain restrictions. According to state law, community colleges must provide diverse educational services emphasizing community-centered programs and universal access. This regulated environment limits HCC's ability to operate solely as a market driven business and represents an inherent tension between its mission to meet the community's needs and its ability to freely generate revenue. A cost/benefit analysis is essential in order for HCC to simultaneously remain a financially viable institution AND serve the public.

Goals

The goals of the Task Force were to:

- Identify key marketable institutional strengths,
- Identify key current and potential markets,
- Make strategic recommendations, and
- Provide specific tactical recommendations to achieve the marketing objectives.

Task Force Members
Community Members

Phyllis Madachy, Task Force Co-Chair, Office on Aging
Maurice Simpkins, Task Force Co-Chair, The Ryland Group
James Breiner, Baltimore Business Journal
Malynda Madzel, Custom Telemarketing Services, Inc.
Carol Marty, The Rouse Company
David Rakes, HCC Board of Trustees

Carolyn West Price, Impact Marketing and Public Relations
Patrick Huddie, Chair, Commission on the Future

College Members

The Task Force would not have been able to produce this report without the extraordinary support of the HCC professional and administrative staff on the taskforce, and information provided by other staff members. We gratefully acknowledge the work of:
Bernice Brunton, Senior Administrative Offices
Randy Bengfort, Director, Public Relations and Marketing.
Lucy Gardner, Director, Library.
Patty Keeton, Executive Director of Workforce Development.
JoAnn Hawkins, Assoc. Dean for Continuing Education and Workforce Development
Barbara Greenfeld, Director, Admissions and Advising.

Marketable Strengths of HCC

HCC distinguishes itself in the arena of academia and continuing education as the place of beginnings, a portal, a passageway, for virtually any destination the learner chooses. HCC is the best place to start for a college degree, a career, or a particular skill. (See Strategic Recommendations on Positioning.)

HCC's strengths include:

- its commitment to open access, accommodating all levels of preparedness,
- its focus on quality teaching and learning,
- unparalleled attention to the student's success,
- its reputation for excellence recognized by employers and four year colleges and universities in Maryland and across the nation,
- general affordability and commitment to providing financial assistance through community partnerships and development programs,
- integration into the community and high degree of adaptability enabling HCC to keep in sync with the "real" world

These strengths are apparent in HCC's performance in the areas of academic education (undergraduate courses that transfer), workforce development (both highly skilled and under skilled employees), general education (Allied Health, Information Technology, and Social Science), and leisure/hobby programs.

HCC is an institution uniquely positioned to serving individual throughout their lives, and should take the long view in building customer relationships.

Key Current and Potential Markets

The Task Force commends HCC for the way in which it is currently serving transfer students, the business community, students on a career path, and those seeking leisure classes. While the products provided to these markets will certainly continue to evolve and expand, the college is well served by the staff's understanding of the needs of these markets.

It is important to understand that "new markets" means more that just listing currently unserved groups in the community. The Task Force found that identifying growth areas involves an understanding of where HCC can do the following:

- develop new products to serve its current markets, for example combined educational-social groups for seniors
- lead current customers to take up a broader range of current products, such as encouraging Spanish I students to enroll in Spanish II
- repackage current products to reach previously unserved markets, such as offering business training courses to subcontractors in the community
- develop new products to serve new markets, for example offering management training in a workshop format to faith organizations to improve their ability to manage their groups
- recognize that there is an important audience of "opinion makers" who are not necessarily customers, including government, community and business leaders.

Based on the variations described above, the Task Force sees numerous opportunities. The listing below is not all-inclusive, but only intended to stimulate the thinking of HCC leadership.

New market segments could include:
- vocational, technical and non-academic students,
- students in private schools,
- non-profit organizations,
- children and youth
- small businesses and tradespeople and
- home based businesses

New course offerings could include:
- business plan development
- obtaining venture capital
- operating home based businesses
- small business development
- e-commerce
- non-profit management
- leadership development
- international business
- plant operations

For example, credit courses could be tailored for owners of small businesses in a continuing education setting. Topics could include marketing, public relations, consumer relations, grant writing, fundraising, and a "how to" on obtaining corporate sponsorship. Ideally business people (active or retired) should teach these, to compete effectively with the plethora of seminars and workshops offered by training organizations.

Two markets that will continue to be significant for HCC are the transfer student and the business community. Demographic analyses of K through 12 students show that the size of this group is growing dramatically. HCC has a golden opportunity to reach more of these students, as well as inducing them to turn to HCC for continual learning later on in life.

The business community is the second area of potential growth by identifying new market segments and continuing to develop new products to stay current with this markets needs.

Finally, the potential of the senior market is enormous. While the college must be cautious about the financial implications of serving seniors who, by state law, cannot be charged tuition, to ignore this market would be disastrous. Seniors represent a potential student base, but also the retired adults in Howard County constitute a good base for adjunct faculty, advisors to the college, or mentors for the students.

Recommendations

Strategic Recommendations

There are two recommendations that require policy decisions from the highest level of the college's administration. Each has several components.

1. **The College Must Develop A Strategic Plan For Growth**. A commitment to growth is assumed, and beginning at the policy level, HCC must take the steps necessary to support growth and sustain or increase quality. There has to be a commitment to matching offerings with market needs. Operational changes and upgrades should be continuously balanced with changing market needs. The county population is growing, the school population booming, the workforce increasing and the senior population expanding. Although zero growth is an option, it would be at odds with the avowed universal access policy of HCC and have deleterious effects on the spirit and morale of the institution.

   (a) **Market Share**: HCC should increase its market share of transfer students as a specific marketing goal. This action will strengthen the stability of HCC by ensuring a continuous and growing source of enrollment. Changes to HCC's physical plant must be considered if an increase in the number of students is planned in order to avoid overcrowding.

   (b) **Recruiting Function:** Active and focused recruiting of good students requires HCC to create a discrete recruiting function as a necessary and strategic complement to the existing admissions process. Full-time and part-time transfer students are the backbone of the colleges credit programs. HCC has been the first step in educational success for numerous individuals, and can easily be marketed as the road to a shining future.

   (c) **Continuous Improvement**: HCC should adopt a policy of continuous improvement in marketing and continue to seek advice from the outside world, especially the business community, for marketing advice, benchmarking, and examples of best practices. This process should serve the overall objectives of the college.

   (d) **Aging Population:** The demographic market opportunity presented by the growing senior population conflicts with the State of Maryland's mandate granting free tuition for seniors. This State policy has negative long-term implications for the fiscal welfare of Howard and the other Maryland

community colleges. The college must address this problem and consider joining with its peers and the legislative and executive branches of the State Government to retain the universal access of community colleges while developing new ways to serve this age group.

2. **HCC Must Develop A Marketing Plan.** Goals and objectives must be developed if HCC is to actively market the college. The marketing plan must recognize that marketing needs to become an integral function of the college administration, and the college must provide the necessary resources to implement marketing goals.

   (a) **HCC should have a Vice President for Marketing:** Development and implementation of a marketing plan, collection and analysis of market data, development of a position statement, and other high-level activities are too critical to HCC's future to be diluted within the administration. While HCC enjoys a good reputation in Howard County, it lacks an identifying image. The Vice President for Marketing should have the authority and budget needed to outsource market research and campaigns.

   (b) **Market Research:** HCC must develop reliable and up to date market data to better serve its key markets. The lack of data hampers HCC's ability to improve current offerings and develop new products for key markets.

   (c) **Capture and Use Student Information in Marketing**: Gather and use student information to market new product and services, assess and forecast trends and identify good customers. Existing information systems should be enhanced as needed to help HCC market itself better, without compromising the confidentiality of student data.

   (d) **Embrace the Web:** Repeat, embrace the Web. Use it in all communications, both internal and external.

   (e) **Branding:** Some college functions could be branded independently while remaining an integral part of HCC. HCC itself does not have a negative image, but community colleges in general do suffer from a stereotyped bargain-basement image. The example of the Business Training Center is useful. Among the business community the BTC is seen a quality provider of training first and part of HCC second. HCC's strong programs in Information Technology and Allied Health seem to be obvious candidates for strategic branding (e.g. Central Maryland IT Institute, Columbia Allied Health College). Branding would allow the separate divisions to sell their own sizzle unencumbered by customer preconceptions about HCC. The decision to separately brand an activity should be carefully evaluated in terms of the long-term interests of the whole college.

   (f) **Competitive Positioning:** The college should articulate a strategic market position that allows it to successfully compete with other providers. We believe that HCC should be perceived as the common or universal point of access to learning. By analogy, the college is the on-ramp to the learning highway, the portal to success, the gateway to knowledge. HCC should also

be seen as a high quality learning experience in the markets it chooses to serve. A flexible, responsive, customer centered learning experience should be had by all, and the whole college community must live and breathe the position that HCC gives the customer What You Need To Know Now! People in all walks of life need to think of HCC as the primary resource: the first place to start a search for knowledge or information, instead of just a place for hobby & self-enrichment classes or the destination for high school kids who can't go anyplace else. The position statement should be clean and simple, saving descriptions/benefits/attributes/features for advertising copy and collateral materials.

(g) **Customer Focus:** HCC should improve the way in which it articulates the features it offers to students. It should communicate these features in a common, unifying theme across all HCC products, consistent with the image HCC wishes to present. Suggested features for the learner are:

- cost effective education
- high quality of education
- responsive to the student customer/flexible in approach
- convenient locations
- affiliation with an educational institution with an outstanding reputation

(h) **Partnerships as Strategic Component of Market Plan:** HCC should develop specific plans to form partnerships with other non-educational community organizations which have similar missions, or which serve a market segment attractive to the college. Potential partners include the Department of Recreation and Parks, Columbia Association, Office on Aging, Leadership Howard County. The partnership activities benefit HCC in two ways:

- Increasing the college's ability to network in the community, resulting in opportunities which grow out relationships in the community, and
- Reducing the areas in which HCC is engaged in unplanned or inefficient overlap with other organizations and keeps HCC focused on its own core competencies.

Tactical Marketing Actions

1. Use many diverse tools for marketing: television, radio, and local publications which have limited distribution but devoted readership such as ZIP 21042 and 21043, Village News, and so forth. These are inexpensive but effective channels to promote HCC.

2. Create a coordinated range of marketing materials, including promotional literature and multimedia (audio, video, and Web) segments, as well as giveaway artifacts, for example "Thinking Caps", "Mighty" HCC pens, and "Cutting Edge Technology" letter openers.

3. Devise frequent student discounts, "bring a friend" bounties, and other relationship promotions, mining the student database to identify HCC's best customers, and to garner more like them.

4. Identify and ask HCC's best individual and business customers what they like about the HCC experience and what they would like to see improved - and fix the problems they see.

5. Identify and include as prospective future students those residents of Howard County who attend private schools.

6. Identify those articulation agreements that are most valuable (in terms of student outcomes) and focus marketing and market research resources on them. Seek new agreements of similar or higher quality. Articulation agreements with good four-year schools like Johns Hopkins are very powerful recruiting tools.

7. Consider articulation agreements with graduate schools, such as the APL program or Johns Hopkins Medical School, where HCC can provide prerequisite and other courses to reentering adult learners.

8. To better reach the senior market, use the Howard County's Office on Aging *Senior Connection* to advertise classes that are under-enrolled.

9. Use the ten senior centers as satellites for all the community, not just seniors. This will increase the effective physical space of the college.

10. Market the cost effectiveness of two years at HCC to students (and parents) followed by two years at a superior university as the smart way of getting a better four-year degree, for the same money, compared to four years at a lower quality university.

11. Use peer experiences to market to students.

12. Market the personality and quality of the instructors.

13. Market HCC's capability and talent for training the trainers. Not only will some people come to be trained, the public perception that HCC cares about the quality of trainers will support HCC's image as a quality provider.

14. Provide incentives for distance learning students by discounting tuition and fees heavily. Firstly, these incentives should increase the number of all distance-learning students, where each new student has low marginal costs but helps defray the initial course-development investment. Secondly, these discounts should redirect seniors and other free-tuition students to low-cost (but equally valuable) distance learning experiences that have zero physical plant impact.

15. Look hard at the growing pool of educated, skilled people who are 50-60, and leaving 70-hour jobs for 30-hour jobs. Is there something that the college can be doing with this population, as students or adjunct faculty?

16. Devise new ways of allocating seats in popular classes; at present places are rationed by timing; this is not a solution since it only defers the problem to the next semester. Debate, for example, auctioning some or all seats in these classes, or early-bird discounts and late-bird penalties. If courses are marketed aggressively, as they should

be, classes will be oversubscribed at first until the capacity of the college grows to match, and flexible pricing is a reliable method of rationing. Also, devise a more intelligent method to allocate scarce places to seniors instead of first come first served.

17. Segment promotional efforts intelligently; for example: co-market distance learning and cable modems together with the local cable company; market business training to regional businesses and their employees with radio segments. Direct mail to alumni and previous customers with programs targeted according to previous interests. Use the same group to reach the general county population with the Bring a Friend program. Provide college employees, business customers and friends of the college with promotional materials to distribute.

18. Segmented Marketing and the Senior Market - HCC should consider developing a membership based learning experience offering seminar style learning opportunities taught by HCC educators incorporated with related non-educational activities, such as museum visits, trips, social events, etc. This would not require any new resources for HCC, but is simply a repackaging of current resources in a product targeted to the adult learner. In addition, HCC has a singular advantage over other colleges and universities (University of Maryland and Johns Hopkins) who are also trying to reach this market: convenient access without going out of the county. The senior learner values this convenience.

19. Simplify the procurement process for marketing-related expenses (within reason) be simplified so division heads can have more autonomy without lengthy requisition processes. Currently it seems that ad deadlines can come and go before expenditure is approved.

20. Support marketing with operations. Embracing the Web (including the ability to register for classes on-line) and use cost-saving technology; for example, use a broadcast fax system at the BTC to keep it in the minds of employers for training needs.

21. Amend the process for course enrollment to facilitate collection of better quality data for research purposes and targeted marketing efforts. This may also involve adjusting the current evaluations of courses and instructors so they can facilitate post-course data collection including anticipation of taking future courses.

22. Create an ad campaign that features actual people who represent specific sectors of the market with their "HCC Stories." Utilize faculty and alumni. The Catholic schools in Baltimore did a very effective campaign using radio and print.

23. Enhance the reception and filming featured on Cable 8. Many of the programs sound like they're recorded in a tin can and do nothing to enhance the image of the college. Once improved, this station should be promoted. Is the general market even aware of the television courses available and how easily they can be accessed? Do market research to gauge the effectiveness of Cable 8.

24. Market courses that have multiple levels more aggressively. For instance, Spanish I students should be encouraged to take Spanish II. Give financial incentives to complete an entire curriculum - take 4 courses, get the 5th one free. Languages in particular, and certain history courses can be cross-marketed with area travel agencies who can promote "resort" courses so people planning to travel to a specific destination can get the basics to get around (not fine details on grammar and conjugating sentences as in traditional language courses).

25. The PR department can impart a sense of responsibility/excitement (even a contest) to HCC divisions, department heads, and faculty. Educate non-PR people to be the eyes and ears of the PR department and alert the office when they think they see a neat human-interest story. Whether it's a rock-climbing history teacher, a dramatic external diploma student story, or the 87-year old student studying Italian, the PR office should be made aware of these to decide what's worth pitching for feature stories to get "oh, by the way" coverage for the college.

26. Reach the high schools' "Gifted & Talented" teachers (a point of entry beyond guidance counselors).

27. Begin a "new homeowner" campaign. Newcomers won't have any old baggage about the college and can be reached early in their move here to let them in on the fact that HCC is the "core of the community's activities." Lists are readily available, and the process can be outsourced to a mailing house to make it turnkey. Regularly scheduled community welcome nights can be part of the campaign. These would be a chance to showcase some of the college's features while providing a get-to-know-you social for newcomers who won't have pre-established resource patterns. One example: Johns Hopkins Bayview campus sends a postcard laminated to a magnet and follows up with regular newsletters. This may be the least that HCC could do.

Appendices

Appendix A Sample Positioning Statement
Appendix B Pictorial View of HCC Public Relations and Marketing
Appendix C HCC Marketing Planning Guide
Appendix D Strategic Marketing and Developing Effective Materials

Appendix A

Sample Positioning Statement

The knowledge gateway to personal and community development

Development of Positioning Statement in Marketing Materials

Of all your educational options HCC is:

.... the place of beginnings.
.... the open door
.... the gateway

For virtually any ultimate destination sought - be it a certain college degree, a certain career, or a certain skill - HCC is the best place to start. Offering a broad range of educational services including academic degrees, transfer agreements with upper-level colleges, business training, and lifelong learning opportunities, HCC lays a solid foundation for life's ambitions.

We have a unique:

- Commitment to open access that accommodates all levels of preparedness;
- Focus on teaching and learning;
- Attention to the individual's success, even to the point of guiding the individual to a different school;
- Reputation for excellence recognized by employers and upper-level colleges and universities;
- Sophisticated technology infrastructure that enhances instruction and makes education more accessible;
- Affordability and commitment to providing financial assistance through community partnerships and special events like the Columbia Classic Grand Prix;
- Integration into the community and high degree of adaptability enabling HCC to keep in sync with the real world.

HCC is the smart way to get ahead. It's for the sensible person who believes solid teaching and customer service are more important to personal success than ivy-covered walls or million-dollar stadiums.